Depot Town Rag

September 1987

FREE 100% RAG CONTENT

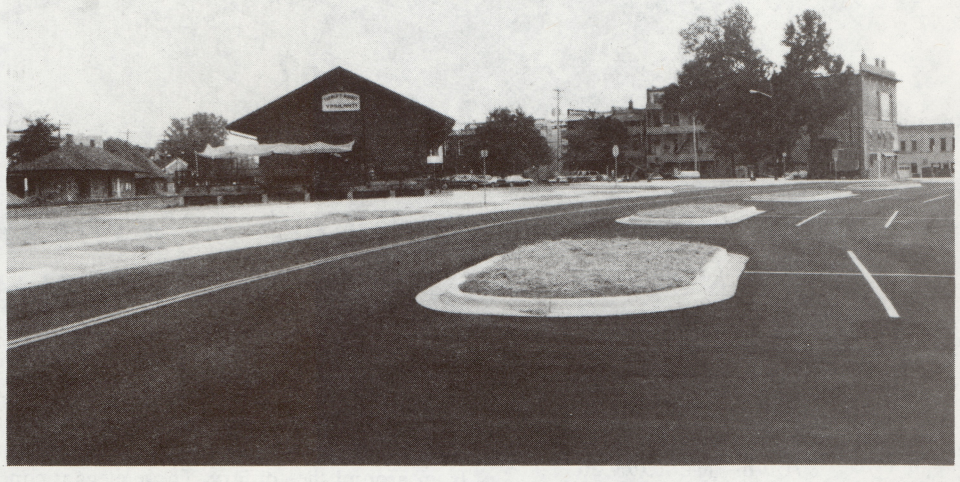
A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

The Depot Town Engineering Society

Depot Town has seen nearly every portion of its constituency organized: the property owners, the business managers, the early gas and steam fanciers, the artists and the antique dealers. Now, isn't it time we organized the district's kids?

That's what happened during this summer's Dog Days when so many of the neighborhood's young descended upon the Old Caboose to prime and paint that centennial structure to compliment John Waite's excellent wood repair. That feat was rewarded with a sail to Bob Lo, but many more projects are ready for heir undertaking.

The Engineers just need one more thing: Conductors. Each conductor will help the group find projects for the good of the block and work toward appropriate compensation and/or remuneration. Stop by the Old Caboose and volunteer your support. (See related article.)



Not the Walt Disney World parking lot, but the new parking lot next to Frog Island, Depot Town's newest amenity is only part of the $700,000 in State funds invested here this summer. The pedestrian 'tridge' and path-paving in the parks were also included. (photo by Lynda Hummel)

The MCRR Depot at Ypsilanti
On the Right Track or Sidetracked Again?

An early August item in *The Ypsilanti Press* reported the depot's new owners' petition to the Historic District Commission to begin restoration of that sadly decayed pile of bricks which serves as the focal point of Ypsilanti's historic Depot Town. The new extension of Maple Street greatly improves access to the old building and all of Depot Town's loyal clientele eagerly awaits signs that this building is catching up with the rest of the block.

The Kovalacs, partners in the enterprise to convert the space into a restaurant of the quality they established at Willis' Pickle Barrel, have pledged the space and their support for the replication of the octagonal signal towner on 'the point' at Cross, River and the railroad tracks, as well.

Such local support as HDC's is gratifying, and even the State of Michigan stands strongly behind the proposal. "It's the Feds who are holding us up," says Carol Kovalac, one of the new owners who hopes to build upon their earlier success in Willis. Such irony is probably not observed from the Washington D.C.-to-Philadelphia view, but when Amtrak, another arm of our federal bureaucracy held that building for so long, they cared little for its use or condition. Now the National Parks Commission, which certifies such preservation projects for tax breaks for historic preservation says it questions the addition of portions to make the depot suitable for a restaurant. They're still talking, thank goodness.

If that's not possible, the parks people suggest the space by used for 'little offices.' There goes the neighborhood. More of that kind of 'progress' and Ypsilanti would become just another air conditioned office mall connecting Southfield with Ann Arbor!

Sign Language

Born again? Now, that's a sign!

What sign were you born under? These last ten years Depot Town seems to have been re-born under a sign reading "construction detour." All that changed in August of 1987 when the new north side parking lot opened up and the bridge took down its barriers from the construction of the three-way pedestrian walkway bridge. At that point in the summer's rehab efforts three terribly official signs reading "Depot Town, next right" appeared on Michigan Avenue, Huron Street and Washtenaw Avenue.

Few of today's tourists can appreciate the red tape necessary for such practical signage to Our Town's feature attraction in the old railroad district. Over the years neighborhood activists often painted their own signs but they never lasted more than one season. Serving on City Council didn't help either. Why, after being turned down by the City's traffic department because such information could "appeal to private interests," we even went to the State legislature via Speaker of the House, Gary Owen, for help.

Now, a decade later, three signs have appeared and we're ready to be 'discovered' by those not lucky enough to live in this lovely old town.

Ike's Depot Town Barbershop
40 East Cross • 483-6300

City Radiator
110 North River 483-2248

Ted's Auto Electric
307 North River • 483-1238

B & D Retail
Plumbing & Heating
310 North River 487-1510

Old Town Restaurant
Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
38 East Cross

Paponetti's Pasta
Homemade Italian Food
and Pastries
17 East Cross 483-3574

Aubree's Saloon & Second Floor
39 East Cross

Pronto Pizza
Pizza & Subs
37 East Cross • 483-4555

Sidetrack
Good Food, Good Drinks,
Good Times
56 East Cross 483-1053

Is There Life (in Depot Town) After Heritage Festival?

Much of Depot Town's Heritage Fest activity is merely an extension of what goes on down here all year long. We just seem bigger and noiser at the end of August:

The Heritage Jazz Competition co-sponsored by WEMU and DTA, manifests itself as a three-month Winter Jazz Series in the Freight House and draws premier performing artists from around the country. Those elegant concerts transform the back lot of the block into a concert hall every bit as authentic and ten times larger than New Orleans' Preservation Hall. The month of June sees the spectacular Frog Island all-day-all-night tent jazz festival take place in our exotic back yard. Jazz continues, also, all year long at Aubree's Second floor -- a Victorian Jazz room never seen in Victoria and Albert's time.

Antique Autos, too, are a regular staple of the district, with Jack Miller's collection at the tracks and Tom Conway's at the top of the hill in the old Fire Hall. Both aficianadoes attract many more clubs and collectors to the block. *The White Triangle News,* the monthly magazine of the Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club is published on these same presses at Hansen's Standard Printing.

The Farmers' Market is truly beautiful at this time of year and will reach its peak at the Fall Fair on Saturday, October 3rd. This is an every Wednesday and Saturday event for the whole community which is supplemented by many other programs throughout the year. The Farm Toy Show and the Quilt Expo at Heritage Fest are only hints of the other kinds of magic which also happen in this venerable old building: weddings, concerts, plays, meetings, auctions and other expositions take place here with great regularity. It's Ypsilanti's answer to Cobo Hall and is just coming into its own.

Artrain has finally become an annual event (two years in a row make it annual, right?) and last year's formation of the Depot Town Artists and Artisans keeps this high-minded artistic activity going on in neighborhood sutdios and galleries throughout the year. Portfolio building, new techniques and exhibitions have marked this group's first full year.

Frog Island may be a great place for the Franzen Brother' Circus, but neighborhood dogs breathe a sigh of relief when the roar of lions and tigers and elephants subsides and the more sedate uses of our back yard resume -- soccer, running, concerts, folk music at the amphitheatre and, or course, frog catching along the Huron River.

All that street action also occurs in the November, December and January for the Victorian Holiday and its adjacent Festival of Lights in Riverside Park. The July Boomer Days events and daily scavenging in the charming specialty shops and antique emporia which line the streets help to keep the street-fair tradition going on all year.

Depot Town is, in truth, a festival of our heritage every day of the year, punctuated by the shrill thrill of the Amtrak and Conrail liners rushing back and forth from Detroit to Chicago. Welcome to a year-round celebration of our heritage. As the Rag said several Festivals ago: Depot Town *IS* What America *WAS.*

(Preservation News, June 1987)

When travel was a common purpose

By David J. Jacobs

STEPHENTOWN, N.Y. — The station is dead! Long live the station!

Thanks to the growing vigor of the preservation movement, more and more moribund railroad stations are gaining new leases on life — proud, marbled Union Station in Albany, N.Y., graciously reincarnated as Norstar Bank; the old wooden station in Lee, Mass., alive and well on Railroad St. as Sullivan's Station Restaurant; the Gare D'Osray in Paris, transmuted for $200 million into a museum to show off great impressionist paintings, as well as its own vaulted, 130-foot-high iron and glass nave and other features of its exuberant 19th century architecture.

That is happy news, but as a friend sighed to me about Albany's reborn station, "It's nice, but it's not a station."

This was not a dig at what was done, but regret for what no longer can be done; Use the building for what it was originally designed. Even in those too young to have known the world before cars and planes displaced trains, railroad stations evoke a yearning for forgotten civilities, for the time when travel on transcontinental limiteds, trolley cars and even intrusive, often blighting, elevated lines could be an event sweetened with bygone graces.

Like the glowing pot-bellied stoves at each Third Avenue El stop in New York, the soaring concourse of the late Penn station and bustling restaurants with real food — the great Oyster Bar still holding out in the vaulted depths of Grand Central.

Now, only after trains no longer run as they did, do we appreciate how they balanced our community interests in our self-interests more happily than autos.

The auto, thanks to its amenities and its beguiling promises of individual power and unlimited freedom, has played a major role in the atomization of America and the masking of our interdependence, once so apparent. Though each of the pioneers' Conestoga wagons, for instance, was a private little world of its own, they were driven across the unknown in trains for mutual aid against attack and other obstacles. Pooling teams of horses or oxen to take turns hauling wagons over the hills made it possible for all to go where none could have gone on their own.

Today, each car is a private little world on wheels in a universe of similar little worlds competing for domination of the road. The auto fosters the arrogant illusion that we can go it alone, aiding and abetting the psychological and physical fragmentation of community life, in which town centers are replaced by highway strips and where helter-skelter homes, like our cars, proclaim our apartness.

The train carried a different message, while it was liberating — allowing wide, convenient choices of travel — it was a freedom made possible by the constraints of timetables, fixed routes and rationing of individual space. Self was served, but so, too, was community. The very act of a metaphor of communities formed constantly in the common interest of travel. Beyond that, of course, the rail system, exemplifying communion rather than the centrifugality of the auto age, played a vital role in the creation and maintenance of communities all across the land.

Like town square, central markets and meeting halls, train stations brought people together for a common purpose. They still do. The Historical Commission in Chester, Mass., on the eastern slopes of the Berkshires, is mobilizing a community drive to save its boarded-up 90-foot Boston and Albany station built in 1841, while in Tacoma, Wash., the Save Our Station campaign has won its battle, and Burlington Northern's Byzantine domed 75-year-old Union Station will be rehabbed as a federal courthouse (Cross Section, PN January)

Around here it is a different story. The Stephentown station, neither raised up nor put down, has been moldering smack-dab in the middle of town ever since the Rutland Railroad ran its last train through these hills nearly 35 years ago.

And over the mountain in Pittsfield, Mass., on Depot Street, near where the grand old Union Station was long ago knocked down for a supermarket, there's a new restaurant called Union Station. It is built in a refurbished old warehouse decorated with crossing signs, signal lights and other railroad memorabilia.

Its west windows look out at the parking lot, the Conrail freights rumbling by, the Berkshires beyond. And just past the parking lot, you see the new Pittsfield station, an 18-by-10-foot metal shed enclosed by 15 warped plastic windows, their frames thoroughly covered with graffiti.

Four yellow and gray steel seats are belted to the concrete floor, high on the west wall a strand of duct tape holds up a tattered "KEEP OUR BERKSHIRES CLEAN" poster and above the phone on the east wall a blue and white sign lists the complete Amtrak Pittsfield passenger schedule — the 11:45 a.m. eastbound Lake Shore Limited and the 8:55 p.m. westbound — and two 800 numbers to call for information.

Last time I checked, the telephone was still working.

Jacobs is a columnist for the Newhouse News Service.

'Tridge,' You've Come a Long Way!

Duane and Karen Scholin visited Depot Town twice in August and they made quite a contribution during each short stay here. Karen drove a pick-up truck with flashers warning 'long load ahead' and Duane preceeded her in a stretch-semi which carried the three-way pedestrian bridge beams to Ypsilanti's Cross Street Bridge from Columbus, Montana where they were finger-jointed and laminated into boards the size of which could not be found in any local lumberyards.

The state of Minnesota would not permit the one hundred and twenty-five-foot-long load on their highways, necessitating a detour through Iowa, then north to Wisconsin for treating and preserving the wooden behemoths. The shorter, ninety-foot beams were then transported via Michigan's upper peninsula and the Mackinac Bridge, enroute to Depot Town. Three days later, the second load, due to its greater length, was routed through Chicago from Wisconsin.

For each trip west, Duane re-joined his stretched trailer to carry Karen's pick-up. Ironically, Karen said she drew more pay for the operation than her husband. Maybe she helped drive back while he slept?

Speculation: Several neighborhod wags have suggested that next year's bridge be built in a 'P' shape, followed by seven more bridges -- one each year -- until 'YPSILANTI' is spelled out from Cross Street to Michigan Avenue for the edification of passing aircraft.

The Grand Trunk, Ltd.
Cards & Gifts
15 East Cross 485-4994

Big Bob's Magazines
Magazines, Comics, Posters
50 East Cross 485-4930

Depot Doo
Fine Design in Hair Style
25 East Cross ‡ 484-3045

Hon's
Flowers & Fancies
46 East Cross 482-2124

Since last year's Heritage Fest:

- **City Body's** new owners, Scott and Bruce Sobbry have breathed a new life into that vernerable facility.
- **Utilities Instrumentation,** behind the Millworks on River Street, have installed historically accurate, but new, windows and doors in their ancient two-story structure which is viewable only from the southern-most street exposure.

- **Brenda Knox,** one of Ypsi's premier seamstresses, is 'making designs on you" from her tidy shop at 27 East Cross Street.
- **Old Town Coin & Gold** has moved into their completely remodeled space in the former filling station in mid-block.
- **Serenity House** (circus sponsors at this year's Festival) has labored above Hansen's Standard Printing all summer to ready their meeting and social halls in the former Eagle's ballroom.
- **Theracom** is the new name for the occupational therapy clinic next to the Cross Street Bridge.

- **Miller's** has added a sun room and deck to the south end of the Ice Cream Parlor and owner, Sally Richie, has one of the most elegant administrative officers on the block.
- **Waltech** moved their downtown enterprise to the old MESC building beyond Miller Motors.
- **Cross Street Antiques** opened new galleries in the back and in the basement.
- **Peddler's Path** has expanded the sales room during their first year on the block.
- **The Old Caboose's** exterior was painted by neighborhood kids and N & W conductor, John Waite, created all new window frames and sills.
- **Follet House's** Jerry Meadows finally made his superb collection public by opening his weekend **Treasure Trove** in the old hotel.
- **Jim MacDonald' Antiques and Apple Annie's Vintage Clothing** saw their whole three-story east wall replaced, added a new awning and a great new color scheme for the facade.
- **Counselor, Dale Rice,** hung out his shingle in the Gold Shop's former space just in time to offer solace to all the stress of the building season.

Ypsilanti Recycling Project
20 East Cross • 487-9727

Cross Street Antiques
33 East Cross

Vintage Passion
Unusual & Different
Costume Jewelry
32 East Cross

Thompson Building Mall
Over 4000 square feet of dealers
412 North River • 484-4288

Depot Exchange Antiques
Professional Furniture Stripping
54 East Cross

Jim MacDonald's Antiques
Apple Annie's
Vintage Clothing
29 East Cross • 481-0555

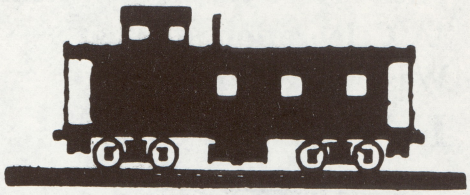
Hansen's
Standard Printing
35 East Cross • 483-0339

Depot Doo
Fine Design in Hair Style
25 East Cross ‡ 484-3045

The Vitamin Shoppe
Vitamins, Herbs,
Nutritional Suppliments
9 East Cross • 485-2711

Our Little Secret
Resale Clothing & Other Niceties
23 East Cross

PEDDLER'S PATH
44 East Cross



Due to early publication of this issue for the end of Heritage Festival, the D.T.A. minutes of 20 August 1987 will be published in the September issue.

September 1987

for the good of the block:

Foundation
8:00 p.m., Thursday, 3rd
The Old Caboose

Association
7:30 p.m., Thursday, 17th
The Old Caboose

Artists & Artisans
7:30 p.m., Wednesday, 9th & 23rd
The Old Caboose

Antique Engine Club
7:30 p.m., Thursday, 24th
Domino's Barn

Depot Town Antique Dealers Assoc.
6:04 p.m., every Tuesday
Old Town Restaurant

Wrong!

Many of our readers pointed out our error in the August Heritage Trivia Quiz --there certainly *is* an example of Gothic Revival architecture on North Huron Street. Councilmember John Van Bolt's yellow Gothic cottage is one of the best of the breed. Virtually every form of Victorian style appears in those two blocks. We just didn't look far enough! -ed.

Depot Town Rag

THE DEPOT TOWN RAG:
A publication of the Depot Town Association, Inc., a nonprofit, tax-exempt corporation dedicated to preserving the unique character of the neighborhood and to the enhancement of its business climate.
The Depot Town Association, Inc.,
Gary McKeever, President
The Caboose, 400 Market Place
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

Fifth in a series on the Michigan Sesquicentennial theme:

"A Celebration of What Was and Will Be"

LUMBER TOWN

In Full Bloom

Depot Town's flower spaces never looked better than during this long, hot summer. Among those deserving the most honorable mention --

***Depot Exchange's** tub overflowed with blossoms, vines and spikes while being the only tub in town mounted on wheels and held in place by a leash.

***Standard Printing's** street-side bed cast marigold sunshine even on the most overcast days.

***Aubree's Saloon** saw burgeoning marigolds and petunias tended by Red, the master gardner, all through the season.

***The Farmers' Market** triangular bed at the crossing reached perennial maturity this year and presented an ever-changing array of color and beauty.

***Downtown's** spectacular tubs were equally Babylonic, with Canna Lillies waving exotically to passers-by.

Reds!

Is a fire truck red? Is the Mayor a Communist? Well, at least The Old Caboose down in Depot Town carries on the tradition of 'really red' - and not lipstick red or fire engine red, but real flame-red in the glossiest oil-base paint to be found in southeastern Michigan. It's also to be found on the hands, arms and elbows of most of the neighborhood young folk who helped paint it in early August.

Shawn Bach and Tommy Grubb started the project and were soon joined by Shanay and Carlos Thomas from across the street. John Waite created all new window frames and trim and soon just about every kid on the block spent a day or two slinging paint. (See the new sidewalk which has been christened in order to relieve the panic of newness)

DTA reciprocated by taking the crew via sailboat from the Enrico Fermi Nuke Plant near Monroe to Bob Lo Island Park in the Detroit River when the exterior was completed.

In 1834 Harvey Williams started a steam run mill at Saginaw to cut timber for the construction of the Michigan Central line from Ypsilanti. He used the engine from the wreck of *Walk-in-the-Water,* the first steamboat above Niagara Falls. When the line was completed, the mill closed down. Mills continued to move to where the timber was and narrow guage railroads moved the logs to the rivers.

Lumber camp life was hard and primitive, as illustrated by the old gag about lumber camp tea: it was tested by dropping an axe head into it. If the axe head sank, the tea was no good; if it floated, the tea was acceptable -- and if it actually dissolved, the tea was perfect!

Since the work of the logging camps was done in winter, when the logs could be skidded across the ice road to the rivers, loggers looked for other activities in the summer when the woods were too wet and bug-infested for cutting. Rail centers like Ypsilanti's Depot Town were far from the lumbering, but entertained the loggers in the off season. These were where places like the Follett House offered up such entertainments as Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and Jenny Lynd sang to the populace. Legends improved over the years and every rail yard town was much mailigned by the local clergy as a sinful place, due to those rowdy out-of-town loggers. Bruce Catton puts that homily to rest in "Michigan - A History":

"The logging camps always closed down when warm weather came, and the hands were paid off. A few would be hired as rivermen, but most of the men simply headed for town, their pay checks in their pockets; they had worked hard all winter, living in squalid quarters and toiling under firm discipline, and now they wanted to relax, and since each man had from four to six months' pay, the lumber towns were happy to offer facilities for relaxation. A whole literature has developed about the enormous binges that rocked the foundations fo these towns, and most of it is quite true: yet it is possible to suspect that there has been a great deal of exaggeration."

Holly's Carrie Nation Days festival is predicated upon just one visit of that famous tee-totaller to their side-street of saloons (now called Battle Alley) which catered to such a trade. The tradition based upon such a tiny happening has since turned in to an enormous observation of commercial promotion.

As Catton tells it, "The same kind of over-dressing is found in the traditional accounts of life in western cow towns, where cowboys apparently spent all of their waking hours drinking whiskey, playing faro, and shooting out the overhead lights, although the cowboy, obviously, spend most of his time on the ranch or on the range and came to town to tie one on only on rare occasions. The same thing was true of the logger. He came in for a spree once a year, and that was it. No matter how freely he squandered his pay, it would last just so long, and then he was finished. About the time the loggers completed their annual orgy, the rivermen came in, all loaded for bear, but they operated under the same restraints. This was a once-a-year blender, and this wild, shouting, fighting carnival of tradition burned itself out rather quickly. The Catacombs of Bay City, the Sawdust Flats of Muskegon, and the oddly named tangles of saloons and brothels of all the other lumber towns had to subsist most of the year on the trade of regular residents. The average lumber town, to be sure, was well able to support such establishments unaided, and most of them took an inverted pride in the reputation thus gained. This year Such-and-Such was the wickedest town in Michigan, three years later it was some other place, after that it was still another, and so on but the point is that neither the logger nor the riverman really spent much of his time drinking and roistering about. Actually, after the first years of the lumber boom, a great many of the loggers had farms in the cut-over lands, and when they got paid off, they headed for home to put in a crop, spending perhaps one evening on the town first. Others took jobs in the sawmills, which operated all summer long. A few hung around the saloons and went on the bum until autumn opened new jobs in the woods, but they burned themselves out rapidly and were never characteristic of the great mass of the lumber country's workers."

Mark Norris's lumber mill operated from one of the two sluices cut from the Huron River at Ypsilanti. Norris's mill stood at about the center of what is called Frog Island, today. The other branch of the sluice continued south to power the flour mill which stood on East Cross Street where Heritage Square (Grand Trunk, Ltd., The Candy Shoppe, T.H.E. Company, The Vitamin Shop and Heritage Real Estate). 1987's fancy new parking lot drains to a cut into that long-converted sluice, just east of the Frog Island storage house. An old photo on the wall at Aubree's shows the double-gabled flour mill at its peak of operation and the long-covered sluice still oozes water beneath the foot bridge to Frog Island near East Cross Street.

Most of Depot Towns's clientele consisted of pillars of the community coming into the Follett House ballroom to hear out-of-town acts like the Swiss Bell Ringers, and the few single men who lived in the rooms above the Oliver House (Aubree's Saloon) were full-time railroaders who worked The Michigan Central all year 'round. True, there was an active complement of bawdy houses in the district, but they apparently could operate on the regular patronage of the local citizenry, much as the Michigan Avenue hookers of today with their mobile homes and "recreational" camping vehicles.

Most every amenity ascribed to the history Ypsilanti's Depot Town can be traced to the fact that it was at the center of things, due, mostly, to the fact that it WAS at the center of things: the depot.

Olde Towne
Coin & Gold
24 E. CROSS STREET
YPSILANTI, MI 48198
(313) 483-6155

RAGTIME
Recovering from our Heritage --
-- Down in Depot Town

WE love to BUY
ANTIQUES
DEPOT EXCHANGE ANTIQUES
54 E Cross. • 482-1780
Next to Sidetrack
Professional Stripping & Refinishing

City Body, Inc.
20 East Cross
Front Alignments
Special - $24.95

The Cricket Box
19 East Cross Street
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198
(313) 487-5595

Get Your
Printing At
Standard Printing
Company
35 East Cross St. • Ypsilanti, MI

RIVER ARTWORKS
CUSTOM
FRAMING
DESIGNER
MATS
482-8785
48 E. CROSS
DEPOT TOWN

Ypsilanti's
Farmers'
Market
in historic Depot Town

YPSI FOOD COOP
WHOLE NATURAL FOOD IN BULK
OR SMALL QUANTITIES
M.,T.,Th.,F. 10-7 Wed. 10-9 312 N.River
483-1520 Sat. 9-7 Sun. 12-5

Miller's
ICE CREAM
42 E. Cross
•
Historic Depot Town
OPEN ALL YEAR!

SEPTEMBER

ON EXHIBIT
"History Revisited"
Ypsilanti Historical Museum

SATURDAY EVENTS
9/5 — Open for Labor Day Weekend!
9/12 — "Kidscrafts" - Making colorful wind sockets, 9-2.
9/19 — Depot Town Merchant Showcase River Art Works, 8-12.
9/26 — Lo-Sugar/No-Sugar Desserts Ypsi Nutrition Coalition 9-12.